

## CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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## **BRITISH AND DUTCH PERCEPTIONS OF CANNIBALISM IN BORNEO, 1882-1964**

*Adrienne Smith*

During Europe's quest for direct control of Borneo from 1882-1964, British and Dutch explorers penetrated Borneo's interior to establish colonies. Explorers witnessed elaborate cannibalistic ceremonies. Some Europeans were excited by the existence of cannibals, others used the indigenous tribes' cannibalistic customs to dehumanize them. This paper asks how British and Dutch travelers viewed cannibalism in Borneo, and why? I will argue that from 1882-1964 British and Dutch perceptions of cannibalism in Borneo generated exploration, while creating a stigma toward the indigenous people.

My research required the use of travelogues in order to reach a better understanding of the European perception of Southeast Asia. Travelogues provide a first-hand account of what colonizers experienced during their attempts to establish colonial rule over the East. The benefit of using travelogues is their representation of European knowledge as a whole during imperialism. The disadvantage of using travelogues, however, is they only focus on European interpretation.

The examination of multiple historical approaches gives a better understanding of Europe's perceptions of Southeast Asian culture. Clifford Geertz argues the need to examine a historical event through the understanding of

its place and time of occurrence.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Edward W. Said explains that the West's knowledge about the Orient was generated from preconceived notions of what the East was not.<sup>2</sup> S.N. Balagangadhara focuses on Europeans' intellectual limits in understanding the "phenomenon of Orientalism."<sup>3</sup> While Marry Luis Pratt explains that travelogues show how Europe saw itself in relation to "the rest of the world" and the need for direct control of the Orient.<sup>4</sup> Han Mui Ling uses the development of a "place" and how it embodied "imperial manhood" through travelogues.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Catalin Avramescu argues travel literature was written with a "critical intention" to put down those they came in contact with, while bolstering themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Historians' research on cannibalism in Borneo attempts to prove the accuracy of the accounts witnessed by Europeans. J.H. Hutton uses travelogues to examine the "diverse causes" of cannibalism and its existence pattern.<sup>7</sup> Peter Metcal challenges reports of cannibalism, calling them "malicious slurs" and the product of lazy anthropologists' "gullibility."<sup>8</sup> John Crawford argues even with an "adequate food supply" cannibalism was practiced and masked by religion.<sup>9</sup>

The rise in competition between European powers for trade in Southeast Asia triggered a shift in imperialism that focused on colonial control of numerous territories. The Netherlands' need to colonize was a reaction towards British efforts to expand their sphere of influence in Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 12.

<sup>3</sup> S.N. Balagangadhara, "The Future of the Present: Thinking through Orientalism," *Cultural Dynamics* 10, no. 2 (1998): 101-121.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Luis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Han Mui Ling, "From Travelogues to Guidebooks: Imagining Colonial Singapore, 1819-1940," *SOJOURN* 18, no. 2 (2003): 258, 261.

<sup>6</sup> Catalin Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Hutton, "Presidential Address: The Cannibal Complex," *Folklore*, 54, no. 2 (1943): 274-286.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Metcalf, "Wine of the Corpse: Endocannibalism and the Great Feast of the Dead in Borneo," *Representations* no. 17 (1987), 96-10p.

<sup>9</sup> John Crawford, "On Cannibalism in Relation to Ethnology," *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, 4 (1866): 105-124.

<sup>10</sup> Paul H. Kratoska, *South East Asia, Colonial History: Empire-building in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 56.

to keep up with the Dutch, the British occupied Burma, Malaya and Borneo ruling their territories as separate governing districts of the empire.<sup>11</sup> In 1887, the French “secured control over South Vietnam’s” government, coming in direct control of Indochina.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of European imperialism, Southeast Asia was divided by political borders and took on a new shape under the direct rule of European Powers. The advertised goal of Imperialism was to bring “modernity” to “backwards” parts of the world.<sup>13</sup> For example, the Dutch colonized Indonesia for over three centuries, and through government united the population toward a common interest and national identity.<sup>14</sup> Unjust Spanish rule over the Philippines prompted a political and national revolution by Filipinos in 1896-1898.<sup>15</sup> When Imperial powers departed, they attempted to leave behind an administration that would benefit their interest in Southeast Asia.<sup>16</sup>

Until the early nineteenth century, North Borneo was a “loose suzerainty,” with its international affairs controlled by the Sultanate of Brunei.<sup>17</sup> The Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824 divided Borneo trade rights, in an attempt to protect British and Dutch trade interests.<sup>18</sup> Borneo was divided territorially between the British who controlled the North, and the Dutch in the South.<sup>19</sup> In 1841, Englishman James Brook, was granted control over the western part of the island, beginning the Raja Dynasty.<sup>20</sup> In 1881, North Borneo was governed

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia, 1770-1890*, (London: Tauris & Co Ltd, 1998), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Chapuis, *Last Emperors of Vietnam: from Tu Duc to Bao Dai*, (Westport, CT: Green Wood Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, “Historicising “Modernity” in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997): 391-409.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bernadita Reyes Churchill, *Philippine Revolution of 1896: Ordinary Lives in Extraordinary Times*, (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2001), chap. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia ‘A fleeting, Passing Phase,’* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 35.

<sup>17</sup> James Stuart Olson, *Historical dictionary of European imperialism*, (Westport, CT: Green Wood Press, 1991), 92.

<sup>18</sup> R. Haller Trost, *The Territorial Dispute Between Indonesia and Malaysia over Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Ligitan in the Celebs Sea: A Study in International Law*, (University of Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit, 1995), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Tamara Thiessen, *Borneo: Sabah, Brunei, Sarawak*, (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Eur, *Far East and Australasia 2003*, (Routledge, 2002), 204.

by a council located in London, known as the British North Borneo Chartered Company.<sup>21</sup> North Borneo was declared a British protectorate in 1888 and the rest of Borneo became a protectorate of the Dutch in 1891.

### **Cannibalism in Borneo**

Cannibalism had been practiced throughout Southeast Asia for centuries before Europeans arrived. In the islands of New Britain, especially Borneo, the natives were “great cannibals” and killed many whites.<sup>22</sup> The British and Dutch settled along the coast of Borneo. In the “heart of the island” lived the most “savage, primitive and wild” people.<sup>23</sup> Numerous tribes inhabited the island, but mainly the Kayan, Ibaan, Milano, Iheir and Dyak tribe practiced head hunting and cannibalism. According to Friedrich Ratzel, the practice of cannibalism in Borneo stemmed from a “religious concentration.”<sup>24</sup> Duarte Barbosa explains, cannibals “eat human flesh” with the belief they are “perpetuating the man eaten” by “incorporating him in their own living bodies”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Cannibal Ceremonies and Beliefs**

Europeans’ fear and intrigue of cannibals in Borneo came from first-hand accounts experienced by explorers. Travelers were shocked by skulls and human remains ornamenting villages. “The skulls of deceased foemen” littered a cannibal village to such an extent the “children play with them as with toys.”<sup>26</sup> Europeans witnessed women and children joyfully “partake of the flesh.”<sup>27</sup> The Dyaks of Borneo were cannibals who participated in “human sacrifice” and seemed “greatly addicted to it.”<sup>28</sup> Women especially loved devouring the

<sup>21</sup> Keat Gin Ooi, *Historical dictionary of Malaysia*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 230.

<sup>22</sup> C. D. Mackellar, *Scented isles and coral gardens: Torres Straits, German New Guinea, and the Dutch East Indies*, (London: Murray, 1912), 135.

<sup>23</sup> Sir John Alexander Hammerton, *Lands and peoples of the world*, (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), 2393.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *The history of mankind*, (New York: The Macmillan and Co. 1898), 449.

<sup>25</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *A description of the coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the beginning of the sixteenth century*, (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1866), 328.

<sup>26</sup> William Fisher Alder, *The isle of vanishing men : a narrative of adventure in cannibal-land*, (New York: Century Co, 1922), 108.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Ling Roth and Hugh Brooke Low, *The natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*, (New York: Truslove & Comba, 1896), 217.

<sup>28</sup> George Windsor Earl, *The eastern Seas, or, Voyage and adventures in the Indian Archipelago, in 1832-33-34: comprising a tour of the island of Java, visits Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, Siam, and c. also an account of the present state of Singapore, with observation on the commercial resources of the archipelago*, (London: Wm. H. Allen and Co, 1873), 270.

“breast” of those being sacrificed according to Henry Ling Roth.<sup>29</sup> Wealthy members of a tribe would donate slaves for the main course of a death feast. “Rich members” of the tribe would give a number of slaves to sacrifice and take full enjoyment of watching them experience “slow torture and then eaten.”<sup>30</sup> The owner of the slaves would take great joy in preparing them for a feast. The rich tribe members of the Ibans often participated in “imbruig his hands in a fellow creature’s blood,” and ornamented their houses with “skulls and teeth.”<sup>31</sup>

Head-hunting expeditions provided the human flesh needed for a feast. The indigenous tribes of Borneo frequently “organized man-hunting expeditions.”<sup>32</sup> Explorers were terrified by the thought of hunting a man like he was an animal. According to Carl Bock, there was nothing more horrifying than “head-hunting expeditions,” and the “tortures of the “death-feasts,” on the return of the victorious parties.<sup>33</sup> Head-hunting was not practiced as a sport among cannibal tribes. “Head-hunting” was practiced as a “religious rite” by the Dyak tribes.<sup>34</sup> By taking a man’s head, a tribe member was bringing good spirits upon his village. “Human flesh” was mainly devoured at a feast that followed a “successful head-hunting expedition.”<sup>35</sup> A victim’s flesh was thoroughly cleaned and prepared in a way that brought out the most flavors. When a “man was killed and eaten,” his flesh was “wrapped in leaves,” and eaten as a “delicacy.”<sup>36</sup> Cannibals would also take parts of their victim’s body as trinkets. Rev. James Chalmers was invited to a cannibal feast where he witnessed guests “with pieces of human flesh dangling from their neck and arms.”<sup>37</sup>

Head-hunting raids were vital to cannibal ceremonies among Borneo’s tribes. A victorious battle supplied many men for a cannibal feast. Many of the battles were fought between differing tribes on the island of Borneo. After attacking a small Malay village, the Iheir and Kayan tribes “sliced off the flesh”

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<sup>29</sup> Mackellar, 135.

<sup>30</sup> “The Head–Hunters of Borneo,” *Science Magazine*, (1883): 189.

<sup>31</sup> Roth, 217.

<sup>32</sup> Mackellar, 135.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Bock, *Temples and elephants: narrative of a journey of exploration through upper Siam and Lao*, (London: S. Low, 1884), 438A.

<sup>34</sup> “The Head –Hunters of Borneo,” 189.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>36</sup> Mackellar, 135.

<sup>37</sup> A. H. (Augustus Henry) Keane, *A geography of the Malay Peninsula, Indo-China, the Eastern Archipelago, the Philippines, and New Guinea*, (London: E. Stanford, 1892), 187.

of one their enemies.<sup>38</sup> When a raid party returned home the tribe members brought out the human flesh and “roasted and ate it” during a celebration.<sup>39</sup> There was a different respect applied when eating a warrior who had lost his life in battle. By eating a dead warrior “his strength and wisdom enters into them.”<sup>40</sup> Cannibals believed that by “eating the heart of a brave enemy” they would become “endued with the bravery of the victim.”<sup>41</sup> There was an even deeper spiritual meaning in eating those who had been killed during war. Among Dyak and Milano tribes, it was the practice to “cut up and consume the raw heart” of a warrior killed in battle in the hopes that those partaking would become “braver.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Cannibal Tours**

The written accounts of head-hunting expeditions and ritualistic ceremonies sparked a new type of European exploration. The boom in cannibal tours came after the settlements and relations with the Dyak tribes were established. Borneo was a place where tourists could take “unusual pictures” of “cannibals, war-dances, weird ceremonies, and customs.”<sup>43</sup> Travelogues sparked tourists’ enthusiasm about seeing a cannibal feast. Both tourists and cannibals profited from the new tourism industry. The interaction between tourists and the interior tribes educated both groups about one another. Tourists would often hire cannibals to hunt sharks, just to watch them work.<sup>44</sup> A form of trade between the tribes and tourists was established, allowing Europeans to leave Borneo with souvenirs and trinkets. The tours became less about seeing cannibals and more about “tourists cannibalizing the exotic.”<sup>45</sup>

Cannibal tours offered an opportunity for Europeans to experience what they read from travelogues. Cannibalism was no longer a piece of fiction, but a

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<sup>38</sup> Sir Spencer St. John, *Life in the Forest of the Far East; or, Travels in northern Borneo*, (London: Elder and co, 1868), 133.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>40</sup> Mackellar, 135.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Stuart Walcott, *Java and her neighbours: a traveller's notes in Java, Celebes, the Moluccas and Sumatra*, (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1914), 328.

<sup>42</sup> Roth, 217.

<sup>43</sup> Edward A. Powell, *Where the strange trails go down: Sulu, Borneo, Celebs, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Straits settlements, Malay, states, Siam, Cambodia, Annam, Cochín-China*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1922), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Karel Čapek, *War with the newts*, (New Haven: Catbird Press, 1936), 20.

<sup>45</sup> Adrian Franklin and Mike Crang, “The trouble with tourism and travel theory,” *Tourist Studies* 1 (2001): 5-22.

tangible practice that could be seen by all Europeans. They no longer had to read about cannibals; they could experience them first hand. Tourists would experience the change of atmosphere while entering the interior jungle. Where they were able to see how close cannibals and the “civilized” man lived. “Cannibal tours” in Borneo were an experience of nature as a “wild/tame dualism,” which attracted tourists from all over the world.<sup>46</sup>

The reality of cannibalism lured European tourists to Borneo. Tourists wanted to “experience the primitive” and observe those who had “eaten human flesh according to Edward Bruner.”<sup>47</sup> Most tourists’ experience with cannibal tribes was superficial. Cannibal tribes acted out human sacrifices and cannibal feasts to attract tourists for trade and viewing fees. Tourists’ preconception of cannibalism was supported by these theatrical reenactments. Adrian Franklin and Mike Crang explain how cannibal tours provided a “dramatic contrast between visitor and locals.”<sup>48</sup> Tourists witnessed primitive people so barbaric they partook in human flesh happily. Europeans couldn’t fathom the idea of eating a human being unless in dire desperation. To see people at such a low level of civilization was almost incomprehensible.

### European Perception

European colonizers used cannibalism in Borneo to degrade the native people. Cannibalism in its most “repulsive form was universally practiced” and those who participated were regarded as “savages at the very lowest stage of human culture.”<sup>49</sup> Europeans were disgusted by members of cannibal tribes and referred to them as grotesque and child-like. The Dyak people of Borneo were seen as “ugly looking people” with “little hair” upon their bodies.<sup>50</sup> Their primitive lifestyle and easily aroused excitement made cannibals no better than little children in the Europeans’ eyes. Members of cannibalistic tribes were referred

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Page, “Towards a Regional Analysis of Tourism in Southeast Asia,” *In Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Peggy Teo, T. C. Chang, and K. C. Hopp, (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001): 27-43.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Bruner, “Of Cannibals, Tourists, and Ethnographers,” *Cultural Anthropology* 4, no. 4 (1989): 438-44.

<sup>48</sup> Franklin and Crang, 5-22.

<sup>49</sup> Keane, 187.

<sup>50</sup> Richard S. Fisher, *Book of the World: Being An Account of All Republics, Empires, and Nations*, (New York: JH Colton 2, 1849), 682.



to as “savage” and often compared to “school boys” with their immature nature.<sup>51</sup> Explorers mocked the significance of the head-hunts for cannibal tribes.

The constant fear of falling victim to cannibalism haunted explorers and their families reading about their experiences. According to traveler Edward Powell, “Heads are to a Dyak as money is to a man in civilized countries.”<sup>52</sup> On a nightly basis traveler John Thompson found himself dreaming of “savage tribes” eating him while still alive or “being cooked one limb at a time.”<sup>53</sup> This same fear was in the minds of the families left behind in Europe by explorers. A boy who had just read about cannibals in “Look and Learn Magazine” feared for his father’s safety in Borneo, imagining cannibals had “stuck him with a poison dart and ate his brains.”<sup>54</sup>

It was hard for Europeans to understand why Borneo’s tribes practiced cannibalism. Malays were represented as “barbarous,” and “men who eat human flesh from choice.”<sup>55</sup> Cannibals were described as a “cruelly disposed people” who enjoyed killing their enemies with “horrible and barbarous tortures.”<sup>56</sup> Explorers couldn’t stand the thought of a human eating another human. Travelers wrote about interior tribes who “ate human flesh” and how it made them “sick to see them,” and they were “afraid and horrified.”<sup>57</sup> Cannibalism was an “at-tested practice” and in its “most odious forms,” “horrible to the imagination of civilized nations.”<sup>58</sup> Colonizers felt by being in Borneo they were in turn helping the interior tribes become more humane. Explorer J.H. Moor stated, “It is simply wonderful what civilization will do for the hungry cannibals.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Twentieth Century*, (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 60.

<sup>52</sup> Edward A. Powell, *Where the strange trails go down: Sulu, Borneo, Celebs, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Sraits settlements, Malay, states, Siam, Cambodia, Annam, Cochín-China*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1922), 119.

<sup>53</sup> John Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China, and China, or, Ten years' travels, adventures, and residence abroad*, (New York: Harper and Bros, 1875), 330.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Watkins, *Stand Before Your God: An American Schoolboy in England*, (Great Britain: Faber & Faber Limited, 1993), 165.

<sup>55</sup> J.H Moor, *Notice of the Indian Archipelago, and adjacent countries: being a collection of papers relating to Borneo, Celebs, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Nias, The Philippines, Sulus, Siam, Cochín China, Malayan Peninsula*, (Singapore: no recorded publisher, 1837), 123.

<sup>56</sup> Roth, 215.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>58</sup> Moor, 123.

<sup>59</sup> New York Central, Hudson River Railroad, “Travel 10,” (1906), no. 5, 434.

European ignorance, discrimination, and sense of entitlement portrayed cannibals as barbaric and in need of civilization.

## Conclusion

European imperialism during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries defined European power in Southeast Asia. These countries were ruled as political extensions of their mother countries. The territories colonized by Europeans went through political, economic, and national changes while being ruled by the West. Southeast Asian countries had closer ties with “European metropolises” than each other.<sup>60</sup> The countries established by European intervention in Southeast Asia progressed through imperialism and created a strong sense of nationalism among its Southeast Asian citizens. The island of Borneo was seen as the center of maritime trading between all Southeast Asian countries. British and Dutch powers invested a lot of time in establishing colonies and trading control in Borneo.

Between the years of 1882-1964, Europeans attempted to discover the unknown of Borneo’s interior, and observed the indigenous people engage in cannibal acts. Travelers witnessed cannibal tribes participate in barbaric head-hunting raids. Some Europeans were invited as guests to elaborate cannibal feasts. The accounts of cannibalism inspired those living in Europe to participate in Imperialism by being a part of cannibal tours on the island. Explorers perceived cannibalism as an abomination practiced by backwards people. Europeans’ perception of cannibalism came from fear of anything different than what they considered civilized. The portrayal of cannibalism by British and Dutch explorers created intrigue for other travelers, while depicting cannibals as primitive and savage. Europe’s occupation of Southeast Asia forever intertwined these two cultures, influencing their perceptions of one another and what it means to be “civilized.”

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<sup>60</sup> Peter A. Coclanis and Tilak Doshi, “Globalization in Southeast Asia,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 570 (2000): 49-64.

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